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ABSTRACT

A look at college reading/study skills programs reveals the haphazard preparation of practitioners trained in child-oriented theory from which they are supposed to extrapolate methods applicable to adult populations. And since reading is often under the auspices of the English department, teachers are inclined to be trained primarily in literature. Paraprofessionals offer a partial answer to inappropriate reading teacher preparation; even without certification, they may possess the qualifications necessary to teach basic communication skills to students--and at a reduced cost. Various successful state and federally funded disadvantaged and compensatory programs dealing with reading have, also, lent credibility to proposed open-door policies. Many of the tests used in reading programs are normed on general college populations and fail to diagnose problems which can be treated effectively. Instead they corroborate what most practitioners already suspect--severe learning disabilities. Available materials are often blamed for ineffective programs when, in fact, practitioners sustain materials based upon habit, whim, or pedagogical predisposition. Further observations reveal inadequate facilities which limit learning alternatives and affect the behavior of the practitioner. (A reference list is included.) (HS)

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# COLLEGE READING: WHERE IT IS

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An Address Delivered at the Fifth Annual Conference of the Western College Reading Association, Reno, Nevada, March 23, 1972

This paper is not intended to be a state-of-the-art report on college reading/study skills. Rather, it attempts to be a brief review, assessment, and tangential evaluation of some selected trends in college reading/study skills programs.

Since a person's judgment is no better than his information, let me mention that resources and other preparation for these observations include 1) the rather deliberate review of research and other reports on college reading; 2) visits to facilities and with personnel on eighty campuses and other institutions designed to effect adult learning; 3) production of two research instruments on the subject; and 4) a term of office as president of Western College Reading Association, in which capacity one receives all manner of opinion on where college reading is and, occasionally, some specific recommendations on where such might be put. Altogether, this input is liable to produce a review disposed toward anxious criticism; for a sizeable portion of a pres-

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ident's day is spent in worrying about what has gone wrong between that day and the publication of the last Newsletter.

## THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTITIONER

The preparation of college-level pracitioners in the art of healing reading disabilities continues to be a haphazard affair (12). In fact Martha Maxwell's 1967 observations (17) continue to be essentially true: that such practitioners consist of those people willing to accept an unusual calling that is abhored by most others in the academic structure; that they do not tend to remain in the field very long; and that if they produce significant research or writing in the field, they tend not to assume leadership in, but rather, to disappear from the college-reading scene once they have written their dissertations.

One is inclined to view a fair proportion of established college reading teachers and directors as well as their objectifying programs as he would a vintage automobile that has been given extraordinary care (5). As one views its polished, gleaming chrome, its authentically restored leather upholstery, its surgically sanitary engine and running gear, its carefully matched and pampered paint job, he is awed by this one-time article of innovation that still stands stately and proud, although its transportational utility on today's highways is extremely limited if not altogether dangerous. Thus, the viewer gives due tribute to history; he pays his respects, but he does not model his contemporary

vehicle upon ingenuous engineering.

Nor can we look to graduate schools to supply colleges with newly trained practitioners prepared to cope with the realities of open enrollment. What passes for training of college-level practitioners continues to amount to an assemblage of generalized and poorly defined education sequences consisting of child-oriented theory courses from which graduate students are supposed to extrapolate methods that can be applied to adult populations. In fact, most of the textbooks on reading methodology refer to the teacher as "she" and the client as the "child." Although as college reading specialists we deal with students whose reading levels can be measured as being in the lower grades, we are in fact dealing with clients with thirteenth-grade-plus glands, desires, and failure syndromes. Because these students have developed highly sophisticated defense mechanisms against conventional instructional strategies, they do not respond to elementary nostrums that were probably ineffectual when they were first applied in the lower grades. (13:8) Even the textbooks fail to recognize or at least emphasize that "learning to read and the mature act of reading are separate skills and should be studied as such." (24:3) Such curricular conditions may even be regarded as holding patterns perpetuated to provide graduate schools with low-cost labor and to keep potential practitioners from an overcrowded market. Also, these conditions are lending credence to the "inconsequentialization" of the education doctorate as an avenue to effective

preparation.

Finally, and as national, regional, and state surveys continue to inform us (3) (15) (19) (25), most of us in college reading/study skills programs reside under the administrative and budgetary auspices of an English department. Consequently, teachers who work in these programs are, by training, residence, and disciplinary leaning, inclined to be trained in literature and other aspects of the humanities that stress writing skills, literary history, and literary appreciation. Already an endangered academic species, English and literature teachers have encountered training chiefly in the ideodynamic literature of our culture and are not disposed to deal with the severe and very basic learning problems of a student who is battling to survive in college. Nor are they liable to be sympathetic to a client who, at best, is semi-literate, much less appreciative of the nuances of literary technique.

## THE PARAPROFESSIONAL

Partial answer to the problem of poor practitioner preparation is the paraprofessional, whose integration in college reading programs is increasing at a rapid rate. Witness the volume of literature of the past year written by (16) and about paraprofessionals engaged in survival programs (1) (2) (10) (21).

Such a dramatic rise in popularity is attributable to a number of circumstances and practices, some of which are questionable.

Since paraprofessionals are usually younger people, they answer a need for energetic and empathetic technicians and tutors to sustain clients' learning activities in the laboratory; consequently, they prove invaluable to the practitioner who attempts to effect individualized learning. To the administrator with his careful eye on the academic dollar, the paraprofessional represents a welcome cost-cutting expediency who, although he may lack certification, may nevertheless possess qualification for the taxing task of inculcating needed basic communications skills in a client. Indeed, a paraprofessional might even be defined as one who is given neither the official responsibility nor the pay of a professional. He has, therefore, become a real threat to some certificated personnel who have been coasting on their credentials. Finally, and perhaps because they lack pedigree and therefore have not assumed a professional posture, paraprofessionals are proving to be invaluable as they become integral to disadvantaged or compensatory programs, programs that, at least in large, urban colleges, attempt to serve Black, Chicano, and other high-risk minority populations for whom more open-door colleges are making accommodation in their academic structures (8) (9) (14) (28).

## DISADVANTAGED AND COMPENSATORY PROGRAMS

Partly because other academic disciplines are not so responsive, various federally and state funded disadvantaged and compensatory programs have become attached to or allied with reading

programs, clinics, and learning centers on campuses that attempt to lend credibility to otherwise disillusioning or non-existent open-door policies. Students entertained by these programs constitute the first echelon of the new student avalanche, which very few instructors in the academic community are emotionally or intellectually prepared to educate (14). However, more and more reading practitioners are aware that if most minority students are going to survive in the academic system, they must obtain innovative, personalized academic treatment. Increasingly, practitioners are cooperating with ethnic facilitators, peer tutors, peer counselors, financial aids officers, and other coordinators of institutional welfare whose purpose is to keep minority students in courses, in school, and finally to provide them with the instruments for obtaining the American dream, a college education.

Whether or not many faculty or the academic community at large like or appreciate the special accommodation afforded by such compensatory programs is of little consequence. There is every indication that, as the "complexion" of our campuses changes, conservative faculty shall be disturbed both by the style and the scale of this transformation. The fact is that such programs are encouraging more minority students with non-traditional life styles to become involved in and to complete their higher education. The inclusion of such students is affecting not only instructional strategies but also the total

academic environment. Even now disadvantaged students are having a traumatic, purgative, and perhaps altogether healthful effect on collegiate educational processes.

## DIAGNOSIS

To say that mass standardized testing instruments are generally inadequate to measure the reading abilities of compensatory students as well as other high-risk college-level clients is to say nothing new. Most of the tests we have are normed on generalized college populations and tend to measure levels of achievement in identifiable areas construed to stand for reading: vocabulary, speed, comprehension. Such tests clearly do not tell us much about the reader who registers in the lower percentiles, nor do the broad areas measured lend themselves to prescriptive interpretations that lead to effective treatment. While these mass testing devices may be expedient to identify and sort certain weak readers that might be conveniently enrolled in "developmental" courses, they serve only as a crude sorting device that corroborates what the practitioner already suspects--severe learning disabilities.

The truth is that in the vast majority of cases we fail to diagnose at all. Even in the area of comparatively easily diagnosed somatic debilities, we neglect to identify students who fail to learn because of untreated, often medically remediable problems. For instance, in not one of the previously mentioned eighty-odd

facilities visited was an adequate visual screening survey consistently employed on all students seeking help or otherwise being referred to a learning specialist for help. Audiometer tests enjoy the same status. Seldom are pronounced speech difficulties diagnosed; less often are they given competent treatment by or through agencies of the college. Moreover, studies (11) (18) (22) have clearly established that a very significant proportion of a college's "learning problem" population may suffer from problems in fusion, binocular coordination, focusing, auditory discrimination, auditory and visual memory, and visual association--all or any one of which may attend and/or affect more academically lame students than we have chosen to admit (18).

If the word accountability is to be more than merely a respectable epithet to be strategically uttered during a lull in a pedagogical conversation, then in our diagnoses we must assume professional responsibility. Therefore, perfunctory pre-post-testing on standardized tests, be it ever so systematic, no longer passes for accountability, whatever the percentile gain. The day is upon us when we shall enjoy legalistic status with our medical peers in the area of negligent behavior. The practitioner well might be sued for prescribing a speed reading course if his client has not first of all passed a competent visual screening survey. Again, the practitioner might be held liable if he does not refer clients with learning disabilities that he is not competent to treat. It seems consistent with a discipline that purports to call itself

professional that we should not be exempt from malpractice suits.

## MATERIALS

If one of the more significant findings and interpretations of the Sweiger report (25) is correct, it is in our materials -- the boxes, the kits, the hardware, the software, the books, the trappings, if you will -- that one will find the true character, effectiveness, and direction of what we do. Sweiger states:

> It appears that, to a large degree, the materials available are determining what is being taught. For the instructor having no education in reading instruction, this may be regarded as at least a security blanket. (25)

If materials control our programs' destinies, the implications are interesting. A practitioner can blame his ineffective program on the lack of materials or on the allegedly poor choices of materials made by his predecessor, who left them behind. Also, the variety and proliferation of materials in a given program might be construed as the expression or symbol of its versatility, or as signifying the abundant broadmindedness, the abandon, or lack of discrimination of its director recently in possession of a generous grant.

Whether or not there are gross reciprocal effects between programs and materials, there is every indication that we continue to review texts and materials for adoption intuitively, without, first of all, reading them thoroughly or working them out with

empathetic impulses (13). We continue to use materials based upon whim, upon propinquity, upon habit, or upon pedagogical predisposition, rather than upon any objectively measured effectiveness (6). Often we sustain materials on traditional grounds, believing they are necessarily enhanced by use and time. The practitioner cannot rely upon reading journals to evaluate competently materials that might be relevant, for such reviews are "usually subjective, tend to be equivocal, seldom point out inadequacies, and are virtually never supported by research findings." (13:7) Nor, except in rare cases (4), is any materials gap likely to be filled by a responsible publisher who will pre-test or carefully evaluate materials before they are offered on the market (26).

## FACILITIES

With few exceptions, most of which have appeared in the last five years, facilities for reading/study skills programs and learning centers consist chiefly of the left-overs, of architectural relics, of damp basements, uninsulated bungalows, and makeshift lecture-classrooms that reflect neither the advances in electronic sophistication nor progress in industrial design that has occurred in the last quarter-century. Ironically enough, probably the most innovative faculty member on campus, the reading person, enjoys the most out-dated housing. It is as if he didn't know better.

In the opinion of reading/study skills personnel who will speak frankly, such inadequate facilities are a matter of both choice and ignorance: the choice of an administration that is ignorant enough to relegate reading/study skills programs to the category of low-grade service courses. Even while voicing humanitarian sentiments consistent with open enrollment, administrators fail to match their alleged understanding with their generosity.

Except for the vision and energy of the practitioner, facilities are playing, perhaps unhappily, the most important part in the development of viable, efficient reading/study skills programs. First of all, the facility itself to a large extent determines not only how many students shall be served but also the kinds and versatility of materials that can be employed (20) -- the number of choices that can be offered a student. Next, if the size and nature of the facility limits the materials offerings therein, then facilities would (as a corollary to Gweiger's statement about the importance of materials (25))be the fundamental factor that affects our reading offerings. Moreover, to the extent that the limitations of the facility constitute the limitations of learning alternatives, the facility is a paramount ingredient. Finally, to the extent that the behavior of the practitioner and client alike is affected by the reality and the symbolism of their architectural surroundings, it is important that we enjoy ecological dignity commensurate with the complicated and serious purposes we pursue.

## CONCLUSION

The lot of the reviewer, the observer, is a lonely one. In his search for truth he must be the judge of his findings, and he must live with his conclusions, many of which in this paper are negative. Such negativism is, it seems, a natural consequence as one attempts to assess a rationale and a methodology that strives to bring about the mathemagenic miracle not tackled by other academic disciplines. Having very deliberately chosen to be in the behavior modification business, we have accepted the role of learning facilitator for students who would otherwise fail or be cooled out. Having to decide whether the academically troubled student is "either a great problem or a great opportunity,"(4:6) we have chosen the latter view. As the myth of the historic success of American education comes into question and as the more dramatic failures of contemporary education become cliches of public discourse, we might yet be the one unassailable unit within the system.

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